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‘Tales eran sus rostros’: Silvina Ocampo and Norah Borges

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Abstract: This article explores the overlap in themes but divergence in aesthetic between the prose and poetry of Silvina Ocampo (1903-1993) and the art works of Norah Borges (1901-1998). The two women were friends and collaborators within the wider circle of writers and artists around Victoria Ocampo’s magazine *Sur*, and Norah Borges provided illustrations or covers for a number of Ocampo’s books. Their differences in approach to shared key themes such as children, angels and sirens is explored particularly through reference to the representation of the face.

He copiado, y después he transformado
los arcanos paisajes y las manos,
los veranos, los ángeles hermanos.
He venerado en sombras el rosado.
Con tintas puedo iluminar las quintas
extintas, las sirenas ya distintas.

(Silvina Ocampo, ‘Inscripción para un dibujo de Norah Borges’, 1942)

This gloss on Norah Borges’ style, taken from Silvina Ocampo’s first published collection of poetry, *Enumeración de la patria* (1942), gives us an indication both of the mischievous way in which Ocampo engaged with Borges’ images and also of the early stage from which their friendship dates.¹ In this succinct inscription, Ocampo describes Borges’ ordered symbolic world of arcane landscapes, *quintas*, fraternal angels and sirens as if through Borges’ own voice, but overlays it with her own gently ironic perspective with the adjectives ‘extintas’ and ‘distintas’. In these two words Ocampo seems to smile indulgently at Borges’ perceived tendency to idealize, and the insistence on internal rhymes evokes the stylized nature of Borges’ images. It is not stated in the poem’s title which drawing the inscription is supposed to accompany and I would suggest deliberately so, since the emblematic subjects chosen are like a thematic index to many pictures by Borges.

According to Ocampo’s husband Bioy Casares, the two women were very close: ‘Creo sinceramente que [Norah] era la amiga que más quería Silvina, y yo tengo en mi dormitorio un cuadro suyo’.² María Moreno describes Ocampo’s living room too as ‘decorada con escenografías de Norah Borges’.³ Borges painted her ‘Retrato de Silvina Ocampo’ in 1937, and in the subsequent years they often had occasion to collaborate artistically. One little-known example is that Norah designed costumes for what was to be a performance of *Los traidores* (co-authored by Ocampo and Juan Rodolfo Wilcock).⁴ Their collaboration more frequently consisted of illustrations Borges provided for Ocampo’s short stories or poetry, such as those for the front covers of the short stories *Las invitadas*⁵ and the poetry collection *Amarillo celeste*⁶, or for the short story ‘Autobiografía de Irene’.⁷ Borges was a regular and respected illustrator of books, and it was natural that in the close circle of friends in which they both moved, she should be Ocampo’s choice as illustrator.⁸ When

they met, Borges had already illustrated books of poetry by her husband-to-be, Guillermo de Torre, by her brother, Jorge Luis Borges, and by Ricardo Molinari;⁹ she would shortly bring her skills to bear on Norah Lange's *Cuadernos de infancia*,¹⁰ and later illustrated the English version of Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel*. This artistic grouping including the *hermanos* Borges and *Los Bioy* has been described as a 'pequeño Bloomsbury porteño'.¹¹ Of all Norah Borges' collaborations within this group, that with Ocampo was especially rich, culminating in the volume *Breve Santoral* – a meditation on the lives and legends of certain saints – which brings together twelve of Borges' images and Ocampo's texts on an equal footing, as is noted in the prologue to the book by Jorge Luis Borges.¹² In this truly collaborative work, the visual and the textual play off against one another allowing two very divergent views of the saints to coexist.¹³ *Breve santoral* indeed seems representative of the overall dynamic of their creative friendship; that is, within a broadly similar thematic framework the two artists communicate very different world views, the one apparently sweetly childlike, the other marked by a streak of sardonic cruelty, worldliness and black humour. Norah Borges' works have been described as 'llenas de mujeres y niños, sirenas y ángeles', a catalogue of characters which would also quite accurately reflect many of Ocampo's stories and poems.¹⁴ This essay will thus map out the significant amount of common ground between the two artists, arguing that they shared certain concerns and preferred images, but that they put these to differing aesthetic ends.

To evaluate the creative dynamic between them and contrast their work does not always require bridging the gap between text and image. Silvina Ocampo, though now known solely for her short stories and poems, began life as a painter, and in this respect, she and Norah are even closer at the beginning of their artistic careers. Borges herself testifies to this closeness: 'Con [...] Silvina dibujábamos mucho juntas.'¹⁵ In answer to an interviewer's question, '¿Cómo comenzó a escribir?', Ocampo replied 'Comencé dibujando. Dibujaba lo que no podía escribir y escribía lo que no podía dibujar.'¹⁶ Thus from the beginning, Ocampo in some sense viewed the two media of expression as complementary, and she was accustomed to moving from one to the other. It forms an interesting parallel to the early development of Norah Borges, who according to May Lorenzo Alcalá illustrated her own adolescent poems (Lorenzo Alcalá 2001). For both artists, initially at least, self-expression could be either verbal or pictorial. Ocampo would probably have known of Norah's forays into poetry and of her subsequently ceding the territory to the family poet, Jorge Luis. This issue of the delineation of artistic territory (Bioy Casares advised Ocampo to leave painting and concentrate on poetry) is therefore another point of connection between the two women.

While in Paris as a young woman, Ocampo had tried unsuccessfully to have painting lessons with Picasso, and subsequently turned to De Chirico; May Lorenzo Alcalá sees this connection to

Paris as a possible link with Norah Borges' developing style of the 30s: 'no hay que descartar [...] algún puente tendido a través de Silvina Ocampo, que había sido alumna de De Chirico en París y tenía obras del maestro en su colección personal' (Lorenzo Alcalá 2001). Indeed Jorge Luis Borges remarks on his sister's taste for Picasso and De Chirico: 'le impresionan los Arlequines de Picasso y los caballos de De Chirico';¹⁷ De Chirico's horses, as 'dos caballos de furia triangular', are alluded to in Ocampo's poem, 'Epístola a Giorgio de Chirico'.¹⁸ But although Ocampo was persuaded by Bioy to concentrate her energies more on the written word, this early sense of the visual persisted in her verbal expression. Noemí Ulla highlights the incidence of references to painting in Ocampo's first published collection of stories *Viaje olvidado* (1937), whether in the titles (such as 'El retrato mal hecho' and 'Diorama') or the working out of the stories: 'Si por un lado los títulos de algunos cuentos de ese libro aún conservan la atmósfera de los impresionistas franceses, el desarrollo de los cuentos revela la enigmática fantasía que el cubismo y el surrealismo pictórico despertaron en la agradecida alumna de Giorgio de Chirico.'¹⁹ Jorge Luis Borges is quoted as saying of Ocampo that 'la inmediata certidumbre de lo visual persiste en su página escrita'²⁰, and Guadalupe Salomón also sees this early link with painting as continuing in Ocampo's literary works: 'esta anterioridad cronológica es, al mismo tiempo, una anterioridad lógica en su narrativa'.²¹ Salomón, echoing Ulla, points out that in *Viaje olvidado*, there is a constant tension between 'la estampita y la fábula', where problems of painterly aesthetics are tackled through the written word, such as the question of perspective in 'Cielo de claraboyas'. This preoccupation with visual means of expression is apparent in Ocampo's reading of Norah Borges in the 'Inscripción' quoted at the beginning of this article, where the variety of verbs used draws attention to different ways of approaching and using images: 'copiar, transformar, venerar, iluminar'.

Ocampo, like Borges, provided covers or illustrations for various books, for example: Bioy Casares' early works *La nueva tormenta, o la vida múltiple de Juan Ruteno* and *La estatua casera*, Francis Korn's *Más Amalias de las que se puede tolerar*, and Noemí Ulla's *El ramito*.²² Her illustrations for Bioy's early books show a pared-down simplicity of line very similar to that seen in Borges' drawing for the cover of Bioy's *La invención de Morel* (1940) (see *Casi un siglo*: 38), a style which is described by May Lorenzo Alcalá as 'simple, plano y lineal' and to which she explicitly likens Ocampo's drawing, saying that 'practicaba por entonces el dibujo con una estética muy cercana a la de Norah' (Lorenzo Alcalá 2001). We can also compare Ocampo's illustrations for *La estatua casera* and *La nueva tormenta* with Borges' for Concha Méndez's *Canciones de mar y tierra* (1930) and Carmen Conde's *Júbilo* (1934).²³ Amongst Ocampo's paintings of the 30s 'hay muchos rostros de niños' (Vázquez 2003), and some of these were exhibited in 1940 at the Amigos del Arte where Borges was also displaying her work 'Recuerdo de Infancia'.²⁴ There are other

instances of thematic convergence: Borges' oil painting 'Las quintas' of 1942 features a placid reclining woman in the foreground, with the quinta behind, a scenario which evokes Ocampo's 1942 cycle of five poems 'Las horas de una estancia' with its series of similarly somnolent tableaux.²⁵ Likewise, Borges' oil paintings 'Adolescencia' (1941) and 'Trenzas' (1942) (*Casi un siglo*: 40, 43) seem to capture a growing self-awareness and self-consciousness among the four girls they picture, sensations similar to those captured verbally – but using visual images – in Ocampo's story 'El caballo muerto' from *Viaje olvidado*: 'Estaban tan quietas que parecía que posaban para un fotógrafo invisible, y era que se sentían crecer, y a una de ellas le entristecía, a las otras dos les gustaba. Por eso estaban a veces atentas y mudas'.²⁶ However, it is worth noticing that typically for Ocampo, the above-quoted story has three girls rather than four, which generates a seemingly inevitable disharmony and instability between the characters.

Ocampo continues her exploration of the idea of a visual imagination throughout her literary career. In 'La lección de dibujo' from *Y así sucesivamente* (1987) she dramatizes in a dreamlike scene the meeting of an artist with her childhood self, Ani Vlis (Silvina in reverse). The artist states that her childhood self taught her all she knows, and they discuss various media (charcoal versus pencil), different genres (the adult, Ocampo's alter ego, favours portraiture) as well as the motivation for artistic expression. The adult insists on charcoal rather than pencil for portraits because the smudgy, blurred edges of charcoal communicate people's suffering more effectively: 'todas las caras sufren o han sufrido, y la carbonilla dibuja las sombras del alma'.²⁷ The adult then relates how she suffered as a child with the problem of literal representation and verisimilitude, only realizing too late that 'la realidad no tiene nada que ver con la pintura' (Ocampo 1999, II: 167), by which time the realism 'mechanism' had been put in place. The child then vanishes like a sketch being rubbed out: 'Se esfumó como un dibujo, pero intuí que volvería a aparecer como una calcomanía pegada a la noche' (168). The transparent cipher 'Ani Vlis' encourages identification of these views about painting with Ocampo herself, and the outcome of the story in which the adult cedes authority to the child in artistic matters echoes the kind of surrealist belief in the unfettered inspiration of children which formed part of Ocampo's artistic background. Indeed, when asked for her favourite painter, Silvina Ocampo responded 'un niño'.²⁸ And the image of a childhood self who teaches the adult intuitive expression – rather than literal realism – and who then persists like a tracing or palimpsest, links visual artistic expression closely to identity and its roots in childhood, a possible parallel with Norah Borges' aesthetic. Borges too frees herself from literal realism, but the idea of smudgy charcoal being more appropriate for portraiture in capturing the ambiguities of human suffering is in marked contrast to Borges' aesthetic, whether in woodcuts or oils; indeed, it is Ocampo's preference for the messy detail of life which will distinguish her writing from Borges'

images and their emphasis on clarity and simplicity. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable ‘complicidad creativa’ (Lorenzo Alcalá 2001) between the two women, which perhaps draws subconsciously on the shared experience of initially moving between text and image, to then largely cede one or other territory in negotiation with a significant male other (Borges or Bioy). More concretely it is fostered by shared thematic interests, the most important of these being the subject of childhood and children.

Both women were producing their art in a prevailing climate of infantilization of women, and to a certain extent, both women were marked by this. In interview Ocampo is frequently associated with a certain affinity to children and with mischievous childlike behaviour.²⁹ Borges too was presented as possessing childlike qualities, for example, a 1925 poem of Francisco Luis Bernárdez describes Norah as ‘la niña que sabía dibujar el mundo’.³⁰ More insistently, Rosa Chacel’s 1941 poem, ‘Epístola a Norah Borges’, subtitled ‘Del arte’, paints Borges as irredeemably childlike: ‘tus delgadas manos / que ignoran el carnal’, ‘así, eras toda tú, tal como un vaso / que de infantil esencia rebosase, [...] la que a tu lápiz lleva de la mano, / la que en tu voz pequeña juguetea: / condena celestial, que te señala.’³¹ This ‘infantil esencia’ is partly projected onto Borges, but also reinforced by the indisputable prominence of children as a subject in her painting; ‘Las cometas’ (1923) (*Casi un siglo*: 29), which Ocampo and Bioy owned, is no exception.³² She illustrated Norah Lange’s *Cuadernos de infancia* and Marcel Schwob’s *La cruzada de los niños*,³³ of which Ocampo had a copy (see Bioy, *Borges*, p. 55), as well as providing covers or illustrations for several of Ocampo’s books which feature children, such as *Autobiografía de Irene* and *Las invitadas*. Both women incline towards the child as a protagonist, for example Roberta Quance points out that in illustrating Carmen Conde’s *Júbilos* (1934), Borges centres on children and chooses to feature a little girl’s hand tracing the letters of the alphabet rather than the hand of the teacher. Ocampo similarly, in her poem ‘Enumeración de la patria’, twice presents us with the image of a child laboriously drawing the map of Argentina in a schoolbook: ‘los ríos te atraviesan de agua roja / sobre el primer cuaderno con paisajes / pintados por la mano de algún niño’ (Ocampo 2002: 11). Taking another parallel, the two girls in Borges’ ‘La galería’ (1949) (*Casi un siglo*: 49) find a corresponding image in Ocampo’s own fascination with pairs of girls as protagonists, for example the twin daughters of the gardener in ‘La siesta en el cedro’, or the two girls with their respective guardian angels – another Borges theme – in ‘Las dos casas de olivos’. But where Borges’ image is relatively untroubled, the hint of dischord suggested by the distance between foreground and background being soothed by the pastel palette and harmonious angles of the two girls’ forearms, Ocampo’s pairs of girls are frequently divided by jealousy or by class boundaries, and her narratives are therefore actively propelled by social discontent. Likewise, Borges’ ‘Ronda de niños’ (1935)

(Gómez de la Serna 1945: Plate IX) picturing seven children finds its echo in Ocampo's short story 'Las invitadas' from the collection of that name, yet in Ocampo's vision the seven children represent the seven deadly sins.

The childlike perceived in Borges' persona and artistic expression is associated with the innocent, the angelic, and other-worldly. Victoria Ocampo reinforces this view, declaring that Borges 'sigue moviéndose en un mundo maravilloso que poco y nada tiene que ver con el nuestro cotidiano'.³⁴ Ocampo too can bring something of the marvellous to her child world, but it is always much more ambiguous in tone. The clearest example of this difference in aesthetic can be seen by comparing Borges' cover for Ocampo's *Las invitadas*, which shows four children communicating by sign language, with the mysterious secrecy of the story 'Tales eran sus rostros' of which it is an illustration (Figure 1). In this story, the protagonists are a group of deaf-mute children, whose faces are all alike: 'en efecto, sus caras eran tan parecidas entre sí, tan inexpresivas como las caras de las escarapelas o de las vírgenes de Luján que lucían sobre sus pechos' (Ocampo 1999, I: 310). After this gentle side-swipe at both patriotism and catholicism, Ocampo incorporates one of her characteristically perverse twists, making these deaf-mute children apparently die tragically in a plane crash. Borges chooses not to focus on this tragic aspect of the story; she prefers to extract for her representation the positive image of children communicating without the need for the spoken word. What is most interesting is that in the Ocampo text, at the point of their death, the children appear to have wings, as though they have mysteriously become transformed into angels: '*los niños al precipitarse en el abismo tenían alas*' (313, original emphasis). This is foreshadowed fantastically in the text, as the mute children all spontaneously draw wings in their art class, explaining to their teacher '*Sentimos las alas, señorita*' (310, original emphasis). As Roberta Quance notes in her essay 'Norah Borges illustrates two Spanish women poets', the critic Benjamín Jarnés has observed in Norah Borges a tendency to conflate angels and children (we could think for example of her painting 'Seis ángeles' of 1931 [*Casi un siglo*: 34], whose angels resemble children), making angels children with wings, and children angels without wings. We might therefore logically expect this dramatic development in the story to be an ideal subject for Borges to illustrate. Yet here, where the text itself provides an opportunity to draw, precisely, children with wings who have apparently become angels, Borges chooses not to. I suggest this is because the 'angels' created by Ocampo's story come ambiguously close to the monstrous (as suggested by the wider context of the passage of Ezekiel from which the story's title and enigmatic epigraph is drawn).³⁵ The children, before bonding as a group, had seen themselves individually as 'diferentes los unos de los otros, [...] como los monstruos prehistóricos de las láminas' (310), and the bond which subsequently develops between the children is perceived from outside by parents and teachers

as potentially ‘venenoso para el alma’ (311). As the narrator comments in anticipation of the events to be related, ‘en realidad no se sabe si era horrible y se volvía hermoso, o si era hermoso y se volvía horrible’ (310). They are not unproblematic child-angels, they are something half macabre half marvellous, whereas Borges’ images of angels appear as children with wings because they are a natural extension of the innocence of her images of children. Ocampo’s ‘angels’ disrupt and disturb such a continuity.

The second important shared theme in which we can also nevertheless see aesthetic divergence is that of the siren. A pair of sirens graces her illustration for Ocampo’s *Cinco poemas*, one playing a kind of plucked mandolin-style instrument and the other a pipe (Figure 2).³⁶ What is most striking about them is that although they are close, the sirens face in different directions and seem almost to be in different planes, with the result that all sense of intimacy is absent from Borges’ representation.³⁷ Quance suggests that in general Norah’s engagement with these mythical creatures is one which removes the dangerous element of their sexuality, making them instead almost maternal. Ocampo, on the other hand, deliberately engages with both their sexuality and their seductiveness in a variety of ways. She portrays sirens in many poems and short stories, particularly for obvious reasons those associated with the sea such as ‘La isla’ (Ocampo 2002: 360-64) and ‘Imprecación al mar’ (369-71). The early story ‘Florindo Flodiola’ shows us a male protagonist cowed by a group of women who ‘hablaban con voces de sirena’ (Ocampo 1999, I: 31); here the traditional view of sirens as a threatening female sexuality is preserved. The figure of the siren occurs in ‘El secreto’ (Ocampo 2002: 315), a poem which guardedly and indirectly speaks of the discovery of sex.³⁸ At first, this secret is polymorphic (like the Freudian dispersed libido) but gradually it acquires form, ‘adquirió un cuerpo / más extraño que un cuerpo de sirena’. This form is female, yet not exclusively so: ‘Fue mujer, vagamente hermafrodita’ (315). Rather than unsexing women and sirens as Norah Borges does (for example by having the siren in ‘La sirenita’ (1938) [*Casi un siglo*: 37] modestly covering her sex with a straw hat), Ocampo here draws attention to the woman/siren’s sex and makes it something unclassifiable and more troubling than simply half woman half fish (mermaid) or half woman half man (hermaphrodite). For Ocampo the siren (and she refers on several occasions to Andersen’s story ‘The Little Mermaid’) is always resolutely ‘una sirena de carne y hueso’.³⁹

Ambiguous sexuality in Ocampo is not limited to sirens. She operates a similar blurring of sexual identities in some of her child protagonists, for example in the previously-discussed ‘Tales eran sus rostros’, where ‘las niñas parecen varones y los varones niñas’, (Ocampo 1999, I: 310); this is not at all the case in Borges’ illustration where despite their similarity, the two boys and two girls are clearly distinguishable. In the poem ‘Sueña con su muerte una prostituta’, the prostitute – who

describes herself as ‘una sirena alejada del mar’ (Ocampo 2003: 330) – presents a troublingly untraditional view of angels: ‘¿Hermafroditas eran? Despertaban terror’ (329). Even when apparently presenting women unambiguously, Ocampo has another surprise in store. The poem ‘Elogios y lamentos del verano’ (Ocampo 2002: 323-24) contains a concise verbal vignette: ‘Las mujeres parecen en los balcones santas’ (323). This image is strongly reminiscent of many of Borges’ paintings of women on balconies, such as ‘La Anunciación’ (1941), ‘La Anunciación de Córdoba’ (1943) or ‘Anunciación en el barrio sur’ (1962) (*Casi un siglo*: 42, 45, 53). However, in the next line we are immediately disabused of this idealistic notion of women as saints: ‘No lo son. Como cántaros de las alfarerías, / sudan o se adormecen sobre las duras losas’. Although Borges’ Annunciation paintings bring the iconic tradition into a very human frame, Ocampo’s comment about women sweating and nodding off makes them far more prosaically earth-bound. Indeed later on the initial suggestion of saintliness is not only undermined but almost profaned by Ocampo – the only words spoken in Ocampo’s representation, rather than a religious annunciation, are the ‘largas, lascivas cosas’ (which we are left to imagine) from men crossing the plaza beneath. In the final stanza of this poem, the poet returns to sirens, questioning Homer’s sirens directly:

Sirenas que oyó Ulises con suaves epigramas,
¿vuestras voces hablaban con un furor patético
del patio y de la siesta, del verano poético,
de las torres construidas por la estación en llamas? (324)

She seems to be subscribing once more to the traditional view of sirens as fatal temptresses and tormenters, asking them if they tormented the men at sea with visions of summer heat, as presumably the poet is currently tormented by visions of cool water and the sea. So once again in contrast to Borges’ placid siren of ‘El marinero y la sirena’ (1931) (*Casi un siglo*: 35) who is certainly not a tormentor, Ocampo’s sirens are stirrers of violent emotion. This role recurs in the poem ‘Buenos Aires ubicua’, where the city is characterized as a siren: ‘Se me antoja que es una gran sirena, / sirena de nostalgia, de esperanza / y también de profundas pesadillas’ (Ocampo 2003: 254). Even in her early vanguardist woodcuts, such as ‘Buenos Aires’ (1922) (*Casi un siglo*: 27) which features a nostalgic fragmentation of typical quintas, balustrades and tiles, Borges’ vision of the city is too orderly and familiar to suggest nightmares.

Children and sirens, women and angels are undoubtedly important elements of the shared creative nexus of images of Borges and Ocampo, and indeed these themes – as Quance suggests, with regard to sirens, and Mizraje regarding childhood – are perhaps a legacy of their generation.⁴⁰ However, the use the two women make of these shared images reveals a divergence of attitude and aesthetic concerns, and this divergence crystallizes through their representation of the face.

Children, sirens, women and angels all have extremely similar faces in Norah's mature paintings, and appear equally serene or contemplative; we can compare for example the 'Cabeza de ángel' (1942) and 'Un ángel' (1949) with those of 'Adolescencia' (1941) or 'El cuarto de música' (1948) (*Casi un siglo*: 44, 48, 40, 47). Their faces are oval, simplified, childlike (as she puts it, 'En mis cuadros siempre todo es redondo y dulce y quieto')⁴¹ and in each face the eyebrows' thin clear arch forms a graceful unity with the bridge of the nose whilst the eyes show an abstracted gaze. These faces are a recurrent identifying feature of Norah's style, alluded to by her brother in his poem 'Buenos Aires': '¿Qué será Buenos Aires? [...] Es la mano de Norah, trazando el rostro de una / amiga que es también el de un ángel.'⁴² Indeed, Jorge Luis is quoted as saying rather archly that 'Según Norah, las personas representadas en un cuadro deben parecerse entre sí. Alguien dijo que el trabajo más interesante de los pintores sería la invención de caras. Los pintores no lo han creído así' (Bioy Casares: 2006, 155). Even Borges herself implies how the face came to be a defining feature of her style from early on, when she describes her three years studying in the Ecole des Beaux Artes in Geneva: 'el director trajo un calco de la *noyée de la Seine* [...] La hice y el maestro me dijo que ya tenía un estilo, porque [...] yo había empleado sólo curvas para conseguir la suavidad del rostro.'⁴³ Ocampo was a sharp if ambiguous interpreter of Borges' art, and she comments on the observation of faces revealed by Norah's style, calling them 'rostros indispensables, de los cuales ella conoce hasta el mínimo detalle.'⁴⁴ Like her 'Inscripción', this comment may be slightly double-edged, indicating that Borges knows these faces so well precisely because she cannot bear to dispense with them (in favour of more individualized faces?). In Ocampo, faces are usually ambiguous as to age and gender. It is not that children and women are described as having the same face, but rather that her characters' faces can be simultaneously youthful and marked with age, such as the face of Miss Hilton in 'El vestido verde aceituna': 'No tenía ninguna edad y uno creía sorprender en ella un gesto de infancia, justo en el momento en que se acentuaban las arrugas más profundas de la cara y la blancura de las trenzas. Otras veces uno creía sorprender en ella una lisura de muchacha joven y un pelo muy rubio, justo en el momento en que se acentuaban los gestos intermitentes de la vejez' (Ocampo 1999, I:16). Likewise, they can look both male and female, or neither, as in the face which Ocampo used to draw obsessively when she was a child, which resulted in familial disapproval and censure on aesthetic (and moral?) grounds:

su mano trazó lentamente
la cara de siempre
[...]
"¿Pero es mujer u hombre?" le preguntaron.
"Un poquito mujer, un poquito hombre" contestó.
Pero sintió que nadie admiraba su dibujo.⁴⁵

Ocampo's thematic list in her poem 'Le hablo al sueño' of all the things in her mind that keep her awake may recall the inscription quoted at the opening of this essay describing Borges' style ('Inscripción para un dibujo de Norah Borges'), but it is significant that for Ocampo in this borderland with dreams (the surrealist artistic space *par excellence*) the guardian angel's face is altered: 'Hay [...] sirenas, querubines / y el ángel de la guarda / con la cara cambiada' (Ocampo 2003: 191). In Ocampo the face is always apocryphal, as in the poem about her own face entitled 'La cara apócrifa'; you can never trust the face since it is 'como una máscara / que jamás se quita' (Ocampo 2003: 124). There is always the possibility of superimposing another face: as Ocampo puts it in an unpublished poem, 'Se puede inventar a alguien, [...] / dibujar sobre la cara otra cara'.⁴⁶ Quite often the attempt to draw a dear and familiar face goes monstrously wrong, as in the example of the protagonist Leandro from *La torre sin fin*, who when he is in the tower 'no pinta lo que quiere: en lugar de la cara de su madre, aparecen arañas y serpientes'.⁴⁷ Ocampo spells out this creed of the ever-changing face in her poem 'Lecciones de metamorfosis' where, addressing a cloud, she says '[...] modificas / las formas de tu cuerpo y de tus caras' (Ocampo 2003: 300). The cloud's different forms are variously compared to a horse (which sends us back to de Chirico), a siren, or to the cruel hair of an Erinye, but most importantly, the poet declares that 'tus lecciones de metamorfosis / he querido seguir hasta la muerte' (300). Ocampo's fidelity is to the changing face, whereas in Borges, the face tends towards the stylized, abstracted, unchanging and safely known. She can declare simply in a title 'Retrato de mis chicos' (1941), a sharp contrast to Ocampo's 'El retrato mal hecho'. Perhaps the only verbal equivalent in Ocampo to the visual sincerity and abstraction of the child's face in Borges is the voice, which can occasionally possess 'inocencia pàrvula [...] sin años' (Ocampo 2003: 181).

Jorge Luis Borges' prologue to the edition of Ocampo's *Autobiografía de Irene* illustrated by his sister does not mention Norah's artwork, focusing solely on the text and on the sense of foreboding created by the eponymous Irene's 'ominoso don [...] de orden profético'.⁴⁸ Indeed, the opening of the story is quite arresting, since the narrator is on her deathbed and eagerly anticipating her own death. The face is a focal point of the description in this narrative; Irene states that 'Hoy estoy muriéndome con el mismo rostro que veía en los espejos de mi infancia. (Apenas he cambiado. Acumulaciones de cansancios, de llantos y de risas han madurado, formado y deformado mi rostro.)' (Ocampo 1999, I: 153) At first this 'mismo rostro' might appear to indicate a convergence with Borges' aesthetic of the unchanging face, although the forming/deforming lines of experience are never to be seen in Borges. However, there is a twist in the narrative significance of Irene's observation, as we gradually learn. She sees herself in death with the same face as was reflected in her childhood mirror not – as we might think – because her adult and child faces are

essentially the same, but because she is blessed, or cursed, with the mysterious and fantastic gift of only being able to ‘remember’ the future. In this sense, she has always been able to ‘remember’ what would be her dying face, and it is that ‘memory’ that she saw in the mirror, much as an ordinary old woman might look in the glass and remember her youthful face. So a statement that at first appears to suggest continuity and identity in fact simply confirms with photographic precision the ‘remembered’ inevitability of change and decay. Likewise, later in the narrative, when Irene watches boys going to school ‘con caras de hombres’ (159), she is not merely imagining them as grown up, but rather she is afflicted by the monstrous ‘memory’ of what she already knows for certain to be their future ‘crueldades ineludibles de los hombres con los hombres’ (159). Throughout this narrative, therefore, the face is where we read Irene’s anguished mode of living, characterized by the absence of past and absolute memory of the future.

That horror is in marked contrast to Borges’ cover illustration of Irene, who exudes a quiet resignation through her simply crossed hands, and the lines of her garment which are in perfect parallel to the arm of the chair, with perhaps a wistful touch communicated through the slight droop of the head. We can read this Irene’s face intertextually – or so to speak, inter pictorially – as unchanged from childhood reflections in that she is part of the continuum of Borges’ images of women whose faces are akin to her pictures of children. The woman addressed in ‘La anunciación’ (1941) (*Casi un siglo*: 42), to take one example, has a similarly wistful gaze, leaning head and folded arms, and despite being subjected to momentous events, as is Irene, she emanates a sense of static calm. Borges’ choice to represent Irene as serenely seated rather than contemplating her dying face, like her earlier choice not to explicitly represent Ocampo’s ambiguously monstrous child-angels, allows Borges to maintain her aesthetic identity whilst nevertheless providing an appropriate illustration of the main protagonist of the text. In this contrast between Ocampo’s dramatic narrative irony and Borges’ pictorial tranquility lies the fundamental difference between the two artists’ approaches, which was so much a feature of their other major collaborative work, *Breve santoral*. Though sharing a thematic repertoire, Ocampo and Borges follow divergent aesthetic paths, Borges tending towards simplification and repetition, Ocampo towards ambiguity and difference.

¹ *Enumeración de la patria*, (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1942), p. 119. May Lorenzo Alcalá dates their meeting after Norah’s first journey to Europe, predating Jorge Luis Borges’ friendship with Adolfo Bioy Casares; according to María Esther Vázquez they met in Paris. See May Lorenzo Alcalá, ‘Norah Borges, ilustradora’ in *Noticias: voz e imagen de Oaxaca* (Edición Digital), 11 March 2001 at <http://www.noticias-oax.com.mx/Marzo/11/Cultura3.html> and María Esther Vázquez, ‘Pincelada de sangre’, *La Nación, Cultura*, 6 July 2003 at http://www.lanacion.com.ar/Archivo/Nota.asp?nota_id=508833.

² In *Norah Borges, casi un siglo de pintura* (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Borges, 1996), p. 21. Henceforth *Casi un siglo*.

³ María Moreno, ‘Frente al espejo’ (interview with Ocampo), *Página 12, Radar*, 9 October 2005 at <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-2558-2005-10-09.html>.

- ⁴ In the event, it didn't get beyond rehearsal stage. See Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Borges*, ed. by Daniel Martino (Barcelona: Destino, 2006), p. 256. Ocampo also asked Borges to do a portrait of one of the characters for the front cover of the published text, though it appears she never did. See undated letter beginning 'Adorada Norah', Silvina Ocampo Papers, Box 1, folder 55, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
- ⁵ Silvina Ocampo, *Las invitadas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1961).
- ⁶ Silvina Ocampo, *Amarillo celeste* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1972).
- ⁷ Illustrated versions of 'Autobiografía de Irene' appear twice; first *Autobiografía de Irene* (Buenos Aires: Círculo de Lectores, 1982) and subsequently in *Cuentistas y pintores argentinos*, selection and prologue by Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1985).
- ⁸ Ana Martínez Quijano observes of Norah that 'su vinculación con el ambiente literario la llevó desde edad temprana a ilustrar textos de Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Federico García Lorca, Ricardo Molinari, además de las principales revistas de la vanguardia argentina y española.' In *Norah Borges, casi un siglo de pintura*, p. 13.
- ⁹ Guillermo de Torre, *Hélices* (Madrid: Mundo Latino, 1923); Jorge Luis Borges, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: [edición del autor], 1923); Ricardo Molinari, *El imaginero* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1927), *El pez y la manzana* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1929), *Panegírico de nuestra Señora de Luján* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1930). See *Norah Borges, casi un siglo de pintura*, 'Cronología', pp. 69-79.
- ¹⁰ Norah Lange, *Cuadernos de infancia* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1937; 1944).
- ¹¹ Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel and Other Stories from 'La trama celeste'* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964). Description of the group from <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/9903/990320/txtarena.html> - 'Bioy era el interlocutor que Borges necesitaba. Crearon con la talentosísima Silvina y Norah Borges un pequeño Bloomsbury porteño. Los unía el humorismo ante la solemnidad literaria.'
- ¹² Silvina Ocampo, *Breve santoral* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1984), illustrated by Norah Borges.
- ¹³ For an analysis of text and image in this work, see Roberta Quance and Fiona Mackintosh, 'Speaking / Seeing Saints: Norah Borges and Silvina Ocampo Collaborate', *Romance Studies*, 22:2 (2004), 149-63.
- ¹⁴ See Francisco Arias Solís' posting to the Latin Americanist Librarians Announcement List, lala-l@uga.cc.uga.edu on 23 July 1998, 'En memoria de Norah Borges'.
- ¹⁵ 'Norah Borges: 90 años entre la pintura y el ángel', interview with María Esther Vázquez in *La Nación*, 20 January 1991, 4th Section, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ Interviewed by Noemí Ulla. In *Encuesta a la literatura argentina contemporánea* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982), pp. 361-65, p. 361.
- ¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *Norah* (Milan: Il Polifilo, 1977), p. 12.
- ¹⁸ Silvina Ocampo, *Poesía completa I*, ed. by Sara Luisa del Carril et al (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2002), p. 245.
- ¹⁹ Noemí Ulla, 'La música y la plástica en la literatura de Silvina Ocampo' in *Segundas jornadas internacionales de literatura argentina / comparatista: actas* (Buenos Aires: UBA, 1997), pp. 408-15, pp. 408-09.
- ²⁰ 'Silvina Ocampo, más que una fuente de inspiración', *Clarín, Suplemento especial*, 9 March 1999, p. 6.
- ²¹ See <http://www.deimosnet.com.ar/ocampo.htm>
- ²² Adolfo Bioy Casares, *La nueva tormenta, o la vida múltiple de Juan Ruteno* (Buenos Aires: [s.n.], 1935) and *La estatua casera* (Buenos Aires: Jacaranda, 1936); Francis Korn, *Más Amalias de las que se puede tolerar* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1989); Noemí Ulla, *El ramito* (Buenos Aires: Último Reino, 1990). Some of Ocampo's illustrations for Bioy's books can be seen at http://www.library.nd.edu/rarebooks/collections/rarebooks/hispanic/southern_cone/bioy_casares/la_estatua.shtml.
- ²³ The illustrations of Conde and Méndez are discussed in Roberta Quance's article 'Norah Borges Illustrates Two Spanish Women Poets', in *Crossing Fields in Modern Spanish Culture*, ed. by Federico Bonaddio and Xon de Ros (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), 54-66.
- ²⁴ Reviewed in *Sur*, 71 (1940), 82-85 by Julio E. Payró. Ocampo is equally diffident about promoting both her literary work and her painting; Payró describes her as 'una pintora que se desdén a sí misma y se abandona, solicitada por otras actividades intelectuales' (p. 82).
- ²⁵ 'Las quintas' (1942), plate XIII in Ramón Gómez de la Serna, *Norah Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1945).
- ²⁶ Silvina Ocampo, *Cuentos completos I* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), p. 23.
- ²⁷ Silvina Ocampo, *Cuentos completos II* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), p. 165.
- ²⁸ Odile Baron Supervielle, 'Silvina Ocampo responde a Proust', *La Nación, Cultura*, 9 January 1994, p. 3.
- ²⁹ See Hugo Beccacece, 'Genial, tierna, tímida, imprevista, imaginativa "Y así sucesivamente": entrevista con Silvina Ocampo', *La Nación, Cultura*, 28 June 1987, p. 14: 'La infancia está siempre presente en ella a través de los recuerdos y, sobre todo, de su visión del mundo, teñida de la misma ingenua malicia de la que hace gala un niño.'
- ³⁰ Reproduced in *Norah Borges, casi un siglo de pintura*, pp. 15-16.
- ³¹ Rosa Chacel, 'Epístola a Norah Borges: Del arte' in *Poesía (1931-1991)*, ed. by Antoni Marí (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1992), pp. 55-56.
- ³² Information from May Lorenzo Alcalá, 'Ramón inventa a Norah', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 620 (2002), 89-94.
- ³³ *Cuadernos de infancia* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1944); *La cruzada de los niños* (Buenos Aires: La Perdiz, 1949).

³⁴ María Esther Vázquez, *Victoria Ocampo* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1991), p. 130.

³⁵ Ezekiel I, 11. The rest of the passage relates Ezekiel's vision of beings like men but each having four faces (man, lion, ox and eagle) and four wings.

³⁶ Silvina Ocampo, *Cinco poemas* (Buenos Aires: Colombo, 1973). According to Notre Dame Library, which holds one of the few traceable copies, this was privately printed for the friends of Juan Osvado Viviano.

³⁷ This can be compared to Borges' 'El marinero y la sirena' (1931) as analysed by Quance, where 'se insinúa la idea de que los dos habitan mundos distintos'. See her article 'Las sirenas de Norah Borges: el sexo inocente', *Boletín de la Fundación Federico García Lorca*, 35-36 (2005), 97-114, p. 113.

³⁸ This poem is from *Los nombres* and was apparently originally intended to give its title to the volume, since the manuscript of the collection is referred to by Bioy as *El secreto* (Bioy Casares 2006: 78).

³⁹ See 'Cedro' from *Las repeticiones y otros relatos inéditos*, ed. by Ernesto Montequin (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2006), p. 66.

⁴⁰ María Gabriela Mizraje notes that around 1937 Norah Lange, Silvina Ocampo and Delfina Bunge all produce works dealing largely with their childhood, whether explicitly – as in Bunge's *Viajes alrededor de mi infancia* (Buenos Aires: López, 1938) and Lange's *Cuadernos de infancia* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1937) – or through a fictional filter, as are the *cuentos* of the volume *Viaje olvidado* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1937). María Gabriela Mizraje, *Norah Lange: infancia y sueños de walkiria* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1995), p. 25.

⁴¹ 'Borges, el hermano de Norah', interview with Rodolfo Braceli in *La Nación Revista*, 18 September 2005 [consulted online at archive of www.lanacion.com.ar].

⁴² Jorge Luis Borges, 'Buenos Aires' from *Elogio de la sombra* (1969), in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), pp. 1009-10, p. 1009. Bioy tells an anecdote which tangentially indicates Norah's propensity to paint a stylized rather than individualized face. At one of Norah's exhibitions (9 May 1955), a woman referred to as 'la Quica' shows Bioy what she claims is Norah's portrait of her, and coquettishly clarifies 'el pecho es invento de Norah, y la cara, como corresponde; pero los muslos son míos' (Bioy Casares 2006: 125).

⁴³ 'Norah Borges: 90 años entre la pintura y el ángel', p. 3.

⁴⁴ Silvina Ocampo, 'Imágenes de Borges' in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 622 (2002), 9-15, p. 11.

⁴⁵ *Inventiones del recuerdo*, ed. by Ernesto Montequin (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2006), pp. 168-69.

⁴⁶ In the Silvina Ocampo Papers, box 1, folder 33, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

⁴⁷ Silvina Ocampo, *La torre sin fin*, ed. by Ernesto Montequin (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2007; 1986), p. 15.

⁴⁸ Prologue quoted from website http://www.rarebooks.nd.edu/collections/rare_book/latin_american/southern_cone/



Figure 1



Figure 2